

On the waterfront, at last

Imagine living a stone's throw from a river but never seeing it or strolling along its banks. That's what happens in older industrial cities like Newark, where views of riverfronts are often blocked by a landscape of factories, warehouses and shipping terminals.

I recently spoke with Joe Della Fave, executive director of the Ironbound Community Corporation in Newark, who told of families who live only blocks from the Passaic River but were barely aware of its existence. The reason? All that could be seen from the windows of their apartment building were rusting stacks of cargo containers.

These days they're seeing and enjoying the river, thanks to a decades-long effort by community leaders to transform Newark's blighted riverfront into public parks.

Riverfront Park off Raymond Boulevard just opened, providing 12.5 acres of green space along the Passaic River in the heavily industrial Ironbound section, which until now has had one of the nation's lowest ratios of public parks to population.

Riverfront Park's sparkling new amenities include playgrounds, baseball and soccer fields, tennis and basketball courts and open grassy areas. And it's just the beginning of an ambitious project by the City of Newark, Essex County and community groups to transform more than two miles of riverfront into a green ribbon of parks and pedestrian paths.

Plans call for linking Riverfront Park to a city-owned 3.5-acre parcel along the river, just to the west, which would get a floating dock and boat launch. Officials also hope to add a stage along the riverfront for concerts and other festivities.

Riverfront Park is not far from the similarly-named Riverbank Park to the west, which was saved by community groups in the 1990s after being proposed as the site of a baseball stadium. It's now a major link in the growing green ribbon, which will be extended west toward Penn Station and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

Newark's riverfront renaissance is part of a trend seen in many of America's old cities, whose waterfronts were developed for manufacturing, shipping and commerce during the Industrial Revolution.

Today, one of the hallmarks of a great river city is a revitalized, accessible urban riverfront, with plenty of places for people to walk, run, bike, play, relax, picnic and enjoy the outdoors.

THE STATE WE'RE IN



By Michele S. Byers, Exec. Dir.,
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Pittsburgh, once known primarily for its steel mills, is a great example of a gritty industrial town that has remade itself into one of the nation's most liveable cities. Its waterfront, where the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers converge to form the Ohio, is a green and vital place that draws locals and visitors alike. Restaurants, shops, hotels and downtown businesses have flourished.

Newark is moving in the right direction with the opening of Riverfront Park. And the timing couldn't be better.

A new U.S. Census report indicates that New Jersey's urbanized counties — including Essex, where Newark is located — may be on the rebound after years of losing population to suburban sprawl.

According to census figures, the fastest-growing counties during the "Great Recession" years from 2008 to 2011 were Hudson (+8.3 percent), Middlesex (+3.7), Union (+3.4), Passaic (+2.8), Bergen (+2.4) and Essex (+2.4). During the same period, suburban counties that saw booming population growth from 2000 to 2008 are now experiencing smaller increases.

Experts say today's young adults, the so-called millennial generation, are more interested in compact, "walkable" communities than sprawling suburbs where a car is needed to get anywhere. I'm convinced that ample parks and open space — including riverfronts — play a huge role in making our urban areas attractive to all ages.

Kudos to the Ironbound Community Corporation and the many grassroots community groups in Newark that worked so hard to create a "blue and green" landscape along the Passaic for all to enjoy.

For more information and photos, visit Newark's Passaic Riverfront Revival website at www.newarkriver.wordpress.com.

And if you want to learn more about preserving New Jersey's precious land and natural resources, go to www.njconservation.org or contact me at info@njconservation.org.

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